

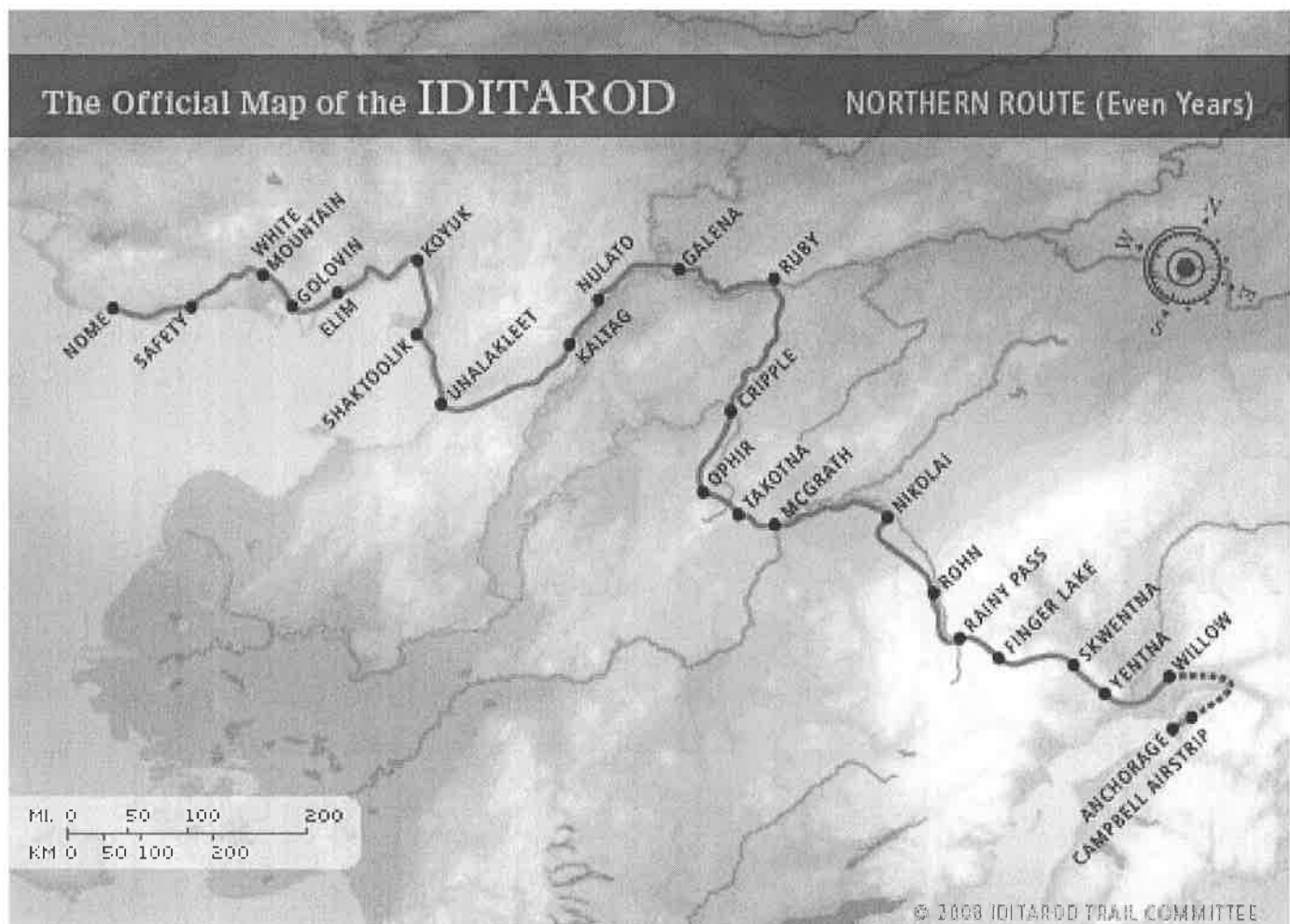
The Last Great Race on Earth

The Iditarod sled-dog race is known to be “The Last Great Race on Earth.” It began in 1973 when thirty-five mushers attempted to cross the 1,120 miles from Nome to Anchorage, Alaska. Of the thirty-five teams, only twenty-two finished. It took the winner 20 days to complete the journey, however, over the years mushers have gained confidence, knowledge and speed. The 2013 winner ran the race in 9 days and 11 hours.

The Iditarod trail was originally used for transporting mail and provisions. As the story goes, in 1925 the trail became a savior’s highway as it brought medicine to children in Nome, from Anchorage, who had contracted diphtheria. It is this reason, and to save the Alaskan huskies and sled dog culture, that sparked the creation of the dog sled race.

There are two different routes used for the Iditarod; the southern route, used on odd-years and the northern route, for even-years. These different routes were created so that one route does not have to bear the impact that the race, its fans, and its publicity have on the towns every year.

Each year, on the first weekend in March, teams consisting of a musher, and 12 to 16 dogs make ready for the grueling trail. No matter the weather conditions, or the condition of the trail, the race begins at 10 o’clock am sharp in Anchorage, Alaska. Teams approach the starting line and are



dispatched in two-minute intervals to complete a short distance “warm up.” The teams only travel about 15 miles on this Saturday and are then taken home to prepare for the actual race that begins in Wasilla, 40 miles north of Anchorage, the following day. The purpose of the Anchorage start is tradition.

Every team has their own strategy. Some mushers like to travel by night, some by day; some teams carry lots of supplies while others risk stopping. All mushers are required to carry an arctic parka, heavy sleeping bag, an ax, snowshoes, food for musher and dogs, and boots for the dogs’ feet in their sleds during the entire race. There are 26 checkpoints along the northern route and 27 along the southern. These areas are provided as check-ins for the teams and are places for rest, eating, and communicating with family. All the checkpoints have veterinarians on call so the health of the dogs can be monitored. There are, however, only three mandatory rest times; after 24 hours, and two eight-hour stops. At this time, teams are required to stop, receive a health screening for themselves and their dogs, have a good meal, and rest.

Winter conditions are always a factor on the Iditarod. Usual temperatures fall around 25 below zero with 30-40 mile per hour winds. These conditions are not uncommon for the race and mushers plan for the extreme. However, temperatures can be worse. In the 1973 race, teams struggled against wind-chills at 130 below zero. Snow is also a factor. While a dog sled is made to glide across the top of the snow, fresh dusty snow is hard to travel in. Sled dogs can’t get their footing and the sled can sink. In contrast, not enough snow can also be hazardous. Dog sleds were not made to bump across stones, roots, and bare ground. This can damage them.

The Iditarod trail stretches over hundreds of miles in Alaskan wilderness. The climb up the 3,160-foot Rainy Pass, Happy River Steps or the steep descent down Happy River Gorge are only a few of the treacherous obstacles on the trail; but not the toughest. There is a section of the trail called Farewell Bend where rocks, roots, and frozen ground jut up through the snow. Though the stretch is flat, the mushers always walk their dogs through this area for it could tear a team apart.

The dogs of a sled team are not your everyday husky dog. These Alaskan Malamutes have been bred for speed, harsh weather conditions and stamina. They are bigger than the normal husky and have thick layers of fur. The dogs are the most important part of a team. Your lead dog(s) must be able to guide and take charge of the rest of the team. All dogs are required to have a tracking device, tag and must pass a health screening to compete.

The bond between musher and team is essential when on the trail. One false move could mean injury, exposure, disqualification or even death. While this race, thousands of miles through Alaskan wilderness, may seem treacherous, it is held as an honor and a privilege for the mushers to compete.